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ABSTRACT

Questionnarie data were obtained from 391 (58% of 668 deans of U.S. graduate and professional programs in liberal arts and sciences, education, law, medicine, and nursing on nontraditional undergraduate grading systems. The major findings are that: (1) grade-point averages remain the single most important criterion for the evaluation of graduate school applicants; (2) when students' records contain a large number of pass-fail grades, standardized test scores and the apparent quality of the undergraduate college gain in importance as admission criteria; (3) any given proportion of pass-fail grades create significantly more negative effect when they occur in courses in applicants' major fields than in courses outside of the major; (4) pass-fail grades in as few as 10% of an applicants' major courses have negative impact on evaluation of these applicatns; and (5) the clear majority of graduate schools report the practice of recomputing state grade-point averages, not only to gain a measure of the students' performance in his major or senior year, but also to justify the G.P.A. for the possible inclusion of pass-fail grades. (HS)

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New College Report # 2*

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A Survey of Graduate School Attitudes Toward Non-traditional Grading Systems: Preliminary Report**

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* New College, Hofstra University's innovative degree-granting undergraduate unit, and the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Hofstra University, have joined in a cooperative program of educational research since 1969. Members of both staffs participate, with the College and the Center pooling resources for the divers projects. Participants in this cooperative venture into educational research include Dr. Harold E. Yuker, Director of the Center; David Christman, Dean of New College; Professor Margaret A. Hofeller, Project Director; and Marina L. Dean and Emaline Finkels, Research Associates. The following report is a direct result of this jointly conducted research and is one of the continuing series of published documents.

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Preface

Through the generosity and encouragement of the Office of University Relations of the International Business Machines Corporation, New College of Hofstra University and the Center for the Study of Higher Education, also at Hofstra, have undertaken a two-year research study of undergraduate grading systems in current use in the United States and their implications for the academic world. Part of this total study included a questionnaire survey of graduate and professional school deans to elicit their responses toward the increased use of non-traditional grading systems in undergraduate colleges. The results of this questionnaire study have been accepted for publication now in the New College-CSHE research series because of its potential value to both undergraduates and liberal arts colleges; over 400 of the graduate and professional school deans participating in the questionnaire survey have likewise requested copies of this part of the total research project. A complete report of the two-year study of undergraduate grading systems will be issued in September, 1972.

Problem

The freedom and self-determination of college undergraduates would appear to have increased significantly in recent years. Participation in university governance and a voice in curricular reform are but two examples of such heightened responsibility. However, the humanization and democratization of American higher education cannot be viewed only in the light of the internal dynamics of any given school. Encounters with the whole academic environment serve to co-determine the realities, if not the ideals, of collegiate educational policy. For example, reforms in undergraduate grading systems demonstrate an aspect of collegiate

planning which aims to better accomplish the ideal of encouraging students to individually choose the conditions of their education. Yet, the reality of this ostensible increase in freedom requires examination.

The accelerating student demand for graduate education has permitted both graduate and professional schools to be more and more selective. At the same time, non-traditional grading systems are becoming increasingly more a part of undergraduate education. In 1971, one survey (Burwen, 1971) estimated that two-thirds of U.S. colleges now offer some grading system options. As a consequence, graduate admissions officers and recruitment representatives of business have had to reexamine their policies and procedures.

The merit of the traditional five point letter grade system (A-F) as a brief, allegedly accurate index of a student's academic worth has long been debated. The value of letter grades depends, of course, on the stated goals of an evaluational system. If student motivation is the primary goal, then the choice of an evaluational system may logically be quite different from the choice made to achieve a common, symbolic code as a summary of an academic production.

In any case, despite any goals for the traditional undergraduate grading system, graduate schools have historically relied heavily on the grade point average or quality point index as the initial screening device. Inclusion of Pass-Fail grades in student's records necessarily changes the meaning of those averages, but not necessarily in a universally consistent fashion since undergraduate colleges vary greatly in the parameters and definitions of the options within their grading systems (Warren, 1971). Graduate schools must, nonetheless, in the current state of supply and demand, continue to discriminate among applicants for admission. Hope-

fully the bases of such discriminations are equity for the applicants and, at the same time, academic success for the graduate programs.

Thus, the present study attempts to determine the current responses of graduate programs toward non-traditional undergraduate grading systems, with an emphasis on reviewing the data of earlier reports of the negative impact of Pass-Fail grades (Hofeller, 1969). This report is the first part of an on-going, comprehensive examination of optional grading systems in contemporary higher education.

Method

An attempt was made to compile a complete listing of U.S. graduate programs, offering doctoral degrees, in the liberal arts and sciences, law, education, medicine and nursing from several standard references on graduate schools: Yearbook of Higher Education, 1970; A Guide to Graduate Study Programs Leading to a Ph.D. Degree, 1969; and The Annual Guides to Graduate Study, 1970. A questionnaire was designed to obtain standardized information concerning graduate school policies and perceptions of non-traditional grading systems (See Appendix A).

These questionnaires, along with an explanatory letter, were addressed to the Deans of the 668 graduate and professional schools in the fields cited above: 261 liberal arts; 168 education; 73 medical; 67 nursing; 99 law. Clearly, admissions officers and/or Chairmen of graduate selection committees may be the executors of policy and, hence, knowledgeable about the reality of responses to and treatment of various forms of student records. However, the restrictions of time and resources for this study precluded examination of these additional variables.

Results

The total number of responses received was 447, including, in some

cases, written reactions to the issues rather than direct responses to the questionnaire items. Completed questionnaires were received from 391 graduate programs: 182 liberal arts; 91 education; 58 law; 35 medical; and 25 nursing schools. Although the data on the responses of the individual types of programs are of significant interest, this report will focus primarily on the replies of the general sample.

Graduate school reactions to non-traditional grading systems, as represented by the sample, are not based on heavy experience with the new reforms. The report of 70% of the sample was that fewer than 10% of their applicants presented "a large proportion of P/F grades" in their records. Nonetheless, the apparent increase in undergraduate colleges making such options available (Burwen, 1971; Warren, 1971; Phi Beta Kappa, 1969) indicates that graduate and professional schools will be forced into the experience if the students electing non-traditional grading choose to pursue graduate careers.

Most observers of contemporary graduate education would expect that traditional grades constitute the major basis for discrimination among applicants. 76.4% of the respondents in this sample reported that undergraduate grade point averages were factors of "great importance" in screening applicants. G.P.A. was clearly rated as the single most important of the range of admissions criteria listed (See Table 1) although other factors are obvicusly not overlooked.

The critical question for this study, however, concerns the changes in graduate admissions screening procedures as a function of the increased use of Pass-Fail grades by undergraduates. Table 2 summarizes the data and illustrates the rise in importance, in particular, of standardized test scores and of the perceived quality of the applicant's

Table 1

Ratings of Importance of Admissions Criteria

Factors	Ratings: Great Importance N	%	Average Importance N	%	Little Importance N	%	No Importance N	%	No Response N	%
Standardized test score for admission	135	(35)	205	(52)	34	(.09)	4	(.01)	13	(.03)
Undergraduate G.P.A.	299	(76)	83	(21)	4	(.01)	0	(0)	5	(.01)
Quality of undergraduate school	140	(36)	207	(53)	33	(08)	5	(.01)	6	(.02)
Letters of recommendation	73	(19)	181	(46)	94	(24)	24	(06)	19	(05)
Entrance exams	19	(.05)	56	(14)	55	(14)	118	(30)	143	(37)
Personal interview	84	(21)	115	(29)	72	(18)	52	(13)	68	(17)
Other criteria	24	(06)	16	(04)	3	(01)	11	(03)	337	(86)

Table 2

Changes in Importance of Admissions Criteria

As A Function of Pass-Fail Grades

Factors	Ratings: Of More Importance N	%	Of Same Importance N	%	Of Less Importance N	%	No Response N	%
Standardized tests	255	(65)	108	(28)	2	(.01)	26	(07)
Undergraduate G.P.A.	110	(28)	154	(39)	83	(21)	44	(11)
Quality of undergraduate school	199	(51)	151	(39)	5	(01)	36	(09)
Letters of recommendation	150	(38)	177	(45)	10	(03)	53	(14)
Entrance exams	51	(13)	134	(34)	22	(06)	184	(47)
Personal interview	107	(27)	175	(45)	11	(03)	98	(25)
Other criteria	13	(03)	36	(09)	1	(.002)	34	(87)

undergraduate school. Apparently, as the meaning of the grade point average increases in ambiguity because of the "mix" of letter and Pass-Fail grades, selection rests more heavily on indices which are at least perceived to carry more incisive information. (The validity of all such measures obviously continue to stand as an empirical question.) For example, of the law schools surveyed in the present study, 33% replied that G.P.A. was less important as a criterion for admission when the student's record contained "a number of Pass-Fail grades." The same reply was made by 21% of the liberal arts colleges, 20% of both the medical and nursing programs and 14% of the education schools.

The relative ratio of Pass-Fail grades to traditional grades in a students' total record would seem to be a major factor in the graduate schools' reaction to evaluating his application. Pass-Fail grades in courses outside of the student's major should have less potential negative effect than Pass-Fail in his major. A review of Table 3 reveals this marked negative effect. As an illustration, where 25% of the student's overall record carries a Pass-Fail evaluation, 27% of the schools report "negative" or "very negative" impact; where the same proportion exists for courses in major, 84% of the respondents report negatively. Even 10% Pass-Fail grades in the student's major discipline has a detrimental effect—36% "negative" and 46% "very negative." Thus, the greater freedom granted to students to opt for non-traditional grading systems not only leads to apparently greater emphasis by graduate schools on other measures which yield ostensibly unequivocal information but also to a negative evaluation of the stuent's record. Whether this is due to the graduate schools increased difficulty in discriminating among students with Pass-Fail records or to an inference about the student's character, motivation or ability remains a moot point.

Table 3

Effect of Various Percentages of Pass-Fail Grades on Evaluation of Applicants

		Effect			
		Positive Effect	No Effect	Negative Effect	Very Negative Effect
% of P-F Grades in Overall Record (N = 305)	10%	8%	83%	8%	1%
	25%	5%	69%	22%	5%
	50%	2%	46%	44%	7%
	75%	2%	33%	47%	18%
	90%	1%	21%	40%	38%
% of P-F Grades in Major (N = 291)	10%	1%	16%	36%	45%
	25%	1%	14%	28%	56%
	50%	1%	14%	25%	60%
	75%	1%	13%	20%	65%
	90%	1%	15%	18%	67%

One of the major problems of evaluating students—the accuracy of any symbol—which the current controversy over Pass-Fail grading has reactivated lies in the area of translation of non-traditional evaluations into traditional terms. Is "Pass" equal to B-/C+? Is it the student's substitute for a D? How often would Pass have been an A if recorded as a letter grade?

Transcripts typically carry a "key," explaining their grading systems; however, the uniqueness of each system continues to preclude universal translation. It may be argued, in fact, that such translation is antithetical to the goals of Pass-Fail grading. Nonetheless, 70% of the respondents report that they occasionally recompute grade point averages as stated on students' transcripts. Not all such recomputation is directed toward corrections for Pass-Fail grades, however. Interest often lies only in the last half of the student's record or in his major field. A total of 43% of the sample report that they, on occasion, have written to undergraduate colleges requesting additional information about non-traditional grading systems.

Finally, the impact of flexible grading policies at the undergraduate level on general perceptions in other academic domains of the meaning of such policies were examined. Respondents were asked if students whose undergraduate schools permitted optional grading systems performed differently than the students from schools with no options. Only 33% of the sample responded; of those, 80% reported no difference. When asked if students whose own records included a large proportion of Pass-Fail grades performed differently than others, the response rate was only 24%, with 86% of these reporting no difference.

Interpretation of these data are complicated by the low response

rate. At one level, this may be a result simply of the placement of these items last on the questionnaire. At another, the explanation would focus on either the respondents' lack of information to date or their unwillingness to confront the question. Still a third, equally reasonable analysis, based on the evidence available from those who did respond, suggests that, based on the graduate schools' admittedly limited experience with Pass-Fail records, a student's background, in terms of his own or his college's record with non-traditional grading, is not correlated with his graduate school performance. Obviously, any current "selection-biases" restrict the definitiveness of this finding.

Summary and Conclusions

Questionnaire data were obtained from 391 (58%) of 668 Deans of U.S. graduate and professional programs in liberal arts and sciences, education, law, medicine and nursing on non-traditional undergraduate grading systems. The major findings are that:

1. Grade point averages remain the single most important criterion for the evaluation of graduate school applicants.
2. When students' records contain a large number of Pass-Fail grades, standardized test scores and the apparent quality of the undergraduate college gain in importance as admissions criteria.
3. Any given proportion of Pass-Fail grades create significantly more negative effect when they occur in courses in applicants' major fields than in his overall record.
4. Pass-Fail grades in as few as 10% of applicants' major course have negative impact on evaluation of these applicants.
5. The clear majority of graduate schools report the practice of

recomputing stated grade point averages, not only to gain a measure of the students' performance in his major or senior year, but also to "justify" the G.P.A. for the possible inclusion of Pass-Fail grades.

These findings indicate that the reality of the selection practices of graduate and professional schools may place restraints on the ideal of a student's new freedom to self-determine the means by which he is evaluated as an undergraduate. The outstanding student, whose credentials include exceptional test scores, an academically prestigous college, and outstanding recommendations, may suffer little jeopardy from a choice of non-traditional grades. However, a well qualified, but no noticeably unique, applicant who opts for Pass-Fail grades may well be discriminated against in favor of his potentially less able but more traditional peer. Although this trend might alter drastically, its present direction is of immediate concern to contemporary students.

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